

Fear Not and Follow Me

Text: Luke 5:1-11

Hymn: Congregation's Choice

“My God is so BIG!  
So strong and so mighty  
There's nothing my God cannot do.”

So sing our children at Vacation Bible School every year. My God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing my God cannot do. A song that is entirely true, and, correctly understood, also helpful, but not very comforting. The power and the strength and the omnipotence of God offer us no comfort at all. I can name a whole load of things that are really strong and mighty that do not comfort you. Tornadoes and hurricanes, the atomic bomb, the super rich, dictators, armies, earthquakes. They are all very strong and mighty. And sometimes it feels as though there's nothing they cannot do. And that fills us not with joy and comfort; it fills us with fear and foreboding.

And rightly so.

We should not be surprised that when Peter encountered the power of Jesus, even when the power was doing good, he was not filled with joy and comfort. Instead, he was filled with fear. He did not leap up and start singing and dancing, but fell to his knees and begged Jesus to go away from him. Why? Because in the power of Jesus, the work of God and the presence of God was clearly and tangibly and visibly impressive. And standing next to Jesus' revelation of His divine nature did not make Peter feel safe but made him feel unsafe. He knew his Old Testament Scriptures well enough to know the difference between things that are holy and things that are profane, things that are clean and things that are unclean. And how God is a holy God and

therefore He is a devouring fire that abides not sin and uncleanness (Deut 4:24).

Throughout the history of the Scriptures, God had visited sin and uncleanness often with terrifying consequences: Sodom and Gomorrah; Egypt and the armies of Pharaoh; the rebellious people in Israel; and later the kingdom of Israel, made exiles at the hands of their enemies.

To be sinful in the presence of God is a terrifying prospect. And in this magnanimous and powerful work of Jesus in providing this miraculous catch of fish, Peter rightly understood that he was in the presence of God Himself. He likely did not understand fully, exactly what that meant, but he understood enough. And he knew that he was not safe in that presence. And so he fell on his knees not to worship Jesus but to beg Jesus to go away: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.”

We do well to share Peter’s fear. We do well to be conscious of the severity of God’s judgment on sin and disobedience. We also do well as Christians not to focus our thoughts or our proclamation on the power of God to do whatever He pleases—His strength, His might, and the fact that there’s nothing that He cannot do. Because if there’s nothing He cannot do, there’s no limit to what He might do, should His patience run out.

The whole world has had a glimpse in the last year and a half of what happens when the power of death is given only a slightly freer reign than usual. Statistically speaking, we are talking about very small increases, but enough to terrify the whole world into self-isolation and home arrest. God has permitted death to poke just one nostril above the surface for a little while, and we suddenly realize that there’s an awful lot we cannot do. We are not strong. We are not mighty. We are helpless. And if God

should withdraw His grace and His favor from us, withdraw His life from us, there is nothing and no one that can spare us.

What can give us comfort? What gave Peter comfort? Please note what Jesus didn't say. He didn't say, "Don't worry. God loves everyone. You're fine." Nor did He say, "Don't worry. I'm meek and mild." He didn't say any of these platitudes which we Christians often mistake for the Gospel. The Gospel is not that God loves everyone. The Gospel is not that Jesus is really, really nice. Ask the Pharisees how nice they found Jesus to be. He could be quite harsh. He very frequently forgot what proper dinner etiquette is and what one is allowed to talk about when in somebody else's house. Jesus had something far better to say than "God loves everyone" or "I'm really nice." He said, "Do not be afraid; from now you will be catching men." That is to say, He proclaimed peace and the absence of fear to Peter. He told him that he had nothing to fear and then He gave him a calling: A specific word of assurance and a specific call. "I have a job for you."

Jesus called him to follow Him. And from that moment he knew that Jesus' power, Jesus' power even to do good things, was not an abstract power next to which he felt small and unworthy and in danger. (And Peter felt this not because of Jesus' anger and wrath, but because of his own sin.) But the moment that Jesus said, "Do not be afraid," He covered that fear-because-of-sin in His own word of assurance. The moment He said, "You will be catching men," He said to Peter in so many words, "I have a calling for you. I have a purpose for you. Not that I should depart from you, but instead that I should never depart from you and you should never depart from me."

That is the good news. And that good news was proclaimed to Peter. But in its own version it is proclaimed to us, to you and to me. This is the Gospel that God wants the whole world to hear, not some generic, universal principle—God loves everyone, Jesus is nice—but rather that Jesus is able to cast away fear, fear of death, fear of the consequences of our own sins, fear of all things, by simply speaking that fear away: “Do not be afraid.” Or, as He later says to the disciples, “Take heart; for I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). He has overcome the enmity of the world against God’s people. He has overcome every power and force in the world that fights against us. He has even overcome the world that still dwells in us, our attachment to this world.

Notice how Jesus left Peter to get on with his job by cleaning the nets and getting the boats cleared out, but all the while, while they were doing that, He preached His Word in their hearing. When we go into our daily lives and our daily routines, we don’t need to go alone. Nor should we go alone. Whether we go to home to enjoy our ongoing retirement or to our daily life of work or a combination of other things, Jesus comes with us. And He comes with us especially when we take Him with us, that is, we take His Word with us.

Jesus has called you. He has said to you, “Do not be afraid. Your sins, however great or grievous they may be, they have been made white as snow in the crimson wash of my blood.” “Come, follow Me. You are mine. I am yours.” He does not regret His calling. And so long as we hold on to that promise, continue to receive it and cling to it and live from it, continue to be instructed and nourished by it, we, too, with Peter and all the apostles, with all the saints of all times, can stand up straight, remain joyful at all times, rejoicing in the Lord that we need not be afraid of the world or of God’s

judgment. Our many sins have been put away. Jesus now fights for us. And He has called us to this life that we now live on this earth.

And this life that we now live is not our life any more. Christ lives in us. He will see us safely through each day, through each week. He will see us safely through this whole life, even the hour of death, because He has prepared for us a place. He has caught us in His net. He has gathered us into His kingdom. He does not regret His call. He will surely do it.

May God strengthen us by His Word, fill us with the fruits of His Spirit, lead us each day, fill us with the joy of salvation, and bring us to that eternal glory which Jesus has already prepared for us. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Pastor Brent McGuire  
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church